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*"Believe and  
Be Baptized":*

**Conversations on Baptism in the  
Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition**

**A Study Guide to Accompany**

***Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church***  
(Lutheran-Mennonite-Roman Catholic Trilateral Conversation on Baptism)

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# Table of Contents

03	Introduction
07	CHAPTER 1: <b>Baptism in the Christian Tradition</b>
11	CHAPTER 2: <b>Anabaptist Understandings of Baptism</b>
15	CHAPTER 3: <b>Anabaptist-Mennonites in Conversation with Each Other . . . and with Other Christians</b>
21	CHAPTER 4: <b>The Trilateral Dialogue: Understandings of Sin, Salvation, Grace, and Faith</b>
27	CHAPTER 5: <b>Sacrament or Symbol? Faith and the Ritual of Baptism</b>
33	CHAPTER 6: <b>Baptism and the Church</b>
39	CHAPTER 7: <b>Baptism and Christian Discipleship</b>
45	CHAPTER 8: <b>Enduring Questions ... and Challenges Accepted</b>



# Introduction

The ingredients seem simple enough: water; a gathering of witnesses; and a few carefully chosen words. Indeed, to a non-Christian person looking in from the outside it might seem hard to understand why the practice of baptism is so significant. But despite its simplicity, virtually every Christian group regards baptism as a *foundational* event—a ritual that expresses convictions basic to their faith.

At the same time, few practices have been the source of more disagreement and debate among Christians. Is baptism *essential* to salvation? What is the appropriate *age* for baptism? How should the ritual be done? Does baptism confer salvation in *itself* ... or is it a *symbol* of salvation already received?

At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, most of the groups that emerged on the Protestant side of that division—Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans—continued the tradition, long established in the Catholic Church, of baptizing infants. The *Anabaptists* (=re-baptizers), by contrast, broke with both Catholic and Protestant groups by insisting that baptism should be reserved only for those individuals old enough to make a conscious decision to follow Jesus and to accept the responsibilities of church membership.

Although Catholics and Protestants disagreed, often violently, about many theological issues, they were united in their opposition to the Anabaptists on the question of baptism. From their perspective, the Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism was both a heresy and an act of civil disobedience that threatened to undermine social order. In the course of the sixteenth century, Catholic and Protestant princes alike regarded the Anabaptists as a cancer that needed to be removed, if necessary by force.

Physical persecution of Anabaptists largely ended by the beginning of the seventeenth century. But the lines of division between Catholics, Protestants, and Anabaptists persisted. Not until the twentieth century did these groups slowly begin to reach out to each other, tentatively at first, to see if they could find common points of theological agreement despite their ongoing differences.

The pioneers in this effort were the Lutherans and Catholics. For more than fifty years, theologians and church leaders on both sides met regularly for conversation, searching for paths toward the restoration of unity in the Body of Christ that had been so deeply divided by the Reformation. In 1999, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity formally signed the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," a statement that described common ground on fundamental questions of grace, salvation, and the character of God.



In the meantime, Mennonites—among the modern-day descendants of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists—were also slowly entering into similar conversations. In 2003 representatives of the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) and the Catholic Church began a formal dialogue. For the first time in nearly five centuries the two groups reflected together on the history of Catholic-Anabaptist relations. The conversation concluded with a statement “Called Together to be Peacemakers” that strongly affirmed their shared commitments in the areas of peacemaking and reconciliation.

In 2005 a five-year dialogue between MWC and the Lutheran World Federation led to an even more substantive outcome. Committed to the principle of “Right Remembering,” representatives of the Anabaptist and Lutheran traditions were able, for the first time, to reflect together critically on the story of their shared beginnings in the sixteenth century. Despite on-going theological differences—especially in their understandings of baptism and the state—the two groups concluded the dialogue in 2010 with a formal service of reconciliation, seeking mutual forgiveness for the animosity and violence of the past and the distorted views of each other’s theology and practice that had become woven into their perceptions of each other.

These efforts by Catholics, Lutherans, and Anabaptist-Mennonites to explore pathways of reconciliation helped to lay the foundation for a remarkable trilateral dialogue, beginning in 2012, that brought all three of these traditions into a shared conversation on the theme of baptism. After five years of sustained dialogue, and another two years of careful writing, the fruits of those ecumenical labors appeared in a text titled “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.”<sup>1</sup>

Within the broad sweep of church history, “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church” is a truly momentous document, one that has the potential of overcoming divisions within the Body of Christ that have persisted for nearly 500 years. In the report, each group offered a biblical and theological basis for its distinctive understanding of baptism, organized largely around their understandings of sin and grace. The report then turned to a description of the ritual of baptism in each tradition, focusing especially on the relationship of baptism to Christian faith as it is nurtured in the context of the Christian community. A third section asked how baptism was connected to Christian discipleship, outlining the personal, ecclesial, and public dimensions of faith in daily life.

One remarkable characteristic of the report was the tone of vulnerability evident throughout the text. From the beginning, participants in the dialogue committed

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<sup>1</sup> The official English version of the text, along with responses by three theologians representing each of the participating groups, appeared as a special issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*.—Cf. “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church: Lutheran-Mennonite-Roman Catholic Trilateral Conversations, 2012-2017,” *MQR* 95 (Jan. 2021), 9-94. Translations of the document into Spanish, German, and French can be found on-line at [www.mwc-cmm.org](http://www.mwc-cmm.org).

themselves to the practice of “receptive ecumenism”—that is, a readiness to receive differences in beliefs and practices as a gift; or, if not as a gift, at least as a question that could prompt new thoughts about their own identity and ways of being the church.

Alongside a biblical and theological defense of each position, each group also offered an honest appraisal of the pastoral challenges and misunderstandings that have emerged around baptism in their own traditions. In a similar way, each group acknowledged ongoing differences in beliefs and practices as well as specific areas of common ground—a posture sometimes described as “differentiated consensus.”

Finally, the document concluded with a section titled “Challenges Accepted” in which representatives from all three traditions agreed to reflect self-critically on several specific questions about their baptismal practices that emerged in the course of the conversation.

“Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church” will not be the last word on the subject of baptism in our communions. Its relevance and reception, especially among the majority churches in the Global South, remains an open question. Nevertheless, the document, appearing nearly five centuries after the first adult baptisms in Zurich, invites Catholics, Lutherans, and Anabaptist-Mennonites alike to regard each other with fresh perspectives, and offers a useful framework for lively discussion and debate.

## **Goals of the Study Guide**

This study guide is intended to help introduce “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church” to churches who are part of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. It begins with a brief overview of the ritual of baptism in the Bible and the Early Church, and traces the emergence of the Catholic tradition of infant baptism. It then introduces the Anabaptist conviction that following Jesus and participating in the life of the church should be a conscious decision, symbolized by voluntary, or adult, baptism, rather than infant baptism.

Subsequent chapters extend the conversation to the larger Christian Church by following the structure of “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church”, giving particular attention to the relationship of baptism to sin, grace, faith, discipleship, and the life of the church. Although the orientation of the study guide is clearly intended for an Anabaptist-Mennonite readership, the text always seeks to present the Catholic and Lutheran perspectives in a clear and fair way.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The text of the original document is easily available on-line: <https://mwc-cmm.org/resources/baptism-and-incorporation-body-christ-church>.

Along the way, the study guide also attempts to honestly acknowledge a host of pastoral questions that Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations continue to confront:

- what is the appropriate age of baptism (especially for those who are raised in the church?)
- how do we know if a candidate is ready for baptism? what kind of instruction is required?
- does the mode of baptism matter?
- what is the link between baptism and church membership? or Christian discipleship?
- how do we appropriately invite young people and visitors to baptism?
- what is the relationship between God’s initiative of grace and the human response?
- can adult baptism be repeated?
- should newcomers who were baptized as infants be rebaptized?
- what is our understanding of baptism for the cognitively impaired?

A study guide is no substitute for reading the actual text of “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.” Ideally, groups using this study guide would do so with frequent reference to the text itself. But for those who find that text too dense—or for those who are interested in a summary of the Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding in conversation with Lutherans and Catholics—this booklet may be a helpful beginning point. Please note that references noted in the text (e.g., [§71]) refer to the paragraph number of the “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church” document.

## Acknowledgments

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At various points Breanna Nickel, assistant professor of Bible and Religion at Goshen College, and Thomas Yoder Neufeld, professor emeritus of New Testament at Conrad Grebel University College, both prepared summaries of *Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church* that were helpful in the preparation of this text. I particularly want to acknowledge my dependence, especially in chapters 4-7, on the work of Thomas Yoder Neufeld—sometimes borrowing short sections with only light revisions. I try to note these instances in the text with appropriate footnotes. His work was indispensable to the project.

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## CHAPTER 1:

# Baptism in the Christian Tradition

**GOAL:** To review the biblical and historical context for baptism as it emerged as a central practice in the Early Church.

## Biblical Themes of Baptism

The roots of Christian baptism draw deeply on the biblical images of Water—an enduring symbol of cleansing, refreshment, and life itself. In the Old Testament water is often associated with God’s healing presence—a spring in the desert (Is. 43:19); a life-giving well (Num. 21:16-17); or justice that flows “like a mighty river” (Amos 5:24).

The tradition of Christian baptism is based on ritual cleansing ceremonies in Judaism and particularly on the imagery from the Old Testament story of the Exodus when God parted the waters of the Red Sea to allow the Children of Israel to flee slavery in Egypt and escape from Pharaoh’s pursuing armies (Ex. 14:21). That dramatic act of “crossing through the waters” marked a foundational moment in biblical history: the “rebirth” of the Children of Israel. Having passed through the waters, they were no longer slaves. They had become a new community of God’s people, bound to each other by the gift of the Law and by their dependence on God for guidance and sustenance.

Echoes of the Exodus story can be clearly heard in the New Testament account of John, who was nicknamed “The Baptist.” John’s fiery preaching called for *repentance*—a transformation of the heart symbolized by a ritual cleansing in the

waters of the Jordan River (Matt. 3:8). According to the Gospels, Jesus began his formal ministry only after he had been baptized by John (Matt. 3:13-17). That act—accompanied by God’s blessing and the clear presence of the Holy Spirit—marked a “crossing over” for Jesus into a new ministry of healing and teaching that culminated three years later in his crucifixion, death and resurrection.

The early Christians understood baptism as a symbol rich with meanings drawn both from the Old Testament and from the life of Jesus. Like the Exodus, baptism in the early church symbolized the renunciation of a life enslaved to the bondage of sin and a “crossing over” into a new identity with a community of believers who, like the Children of Israel, were committed to living in dependence on God.

The early church understood baptism as a symbol of entry into the Christian community (Acts 2:38, 4; I Cor. 12:12-13). But baptism was also closely connected with repentance and an encounter with the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:12; 16:14-15). And many early Christians—in keeping with the imagery of Paul (Rom. 6:1-4)—regarded baptism as a re-enactment of the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptismal candidates walked into the water naked, stripped and vulnerable, like Christ on the cross, dying to the old self. After emerging from the water they were dressed in robes of white as a symbol of the resurrection and their new identity as followers of Jesus (Gal. 3:26-29; Col. 2:9-15).

Strong evidence from the second and third centuries suggests that the early Christians baptized only individuals old enough to understand the consequences of the ritual; and then only after a long period of rigorous instruction and training. Tertullian, for example, writing around the year 200, insisted that youth should be instructed before baptism, so that they are “led by their own free choice to seek for it [i.e., baptism] with sincere longing of the heart.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the early church reserved baptism for those who had experienced a transformation of the heart; were committed to a life of daily discipleship; and were ready to become part of a new community of believers.

In summary, the biblical passages suggest baptism:

1. was connected with acceptance of the gospel message;
2. was an expression of repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and a commitment to obedience;
3. was performed “in the name of Christ” and incorporating people into union with Christ;
4. incorporated new believers into the church as the body of Christ;
5. and marked a commitment to become a disciple of Jesus in daily life.

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<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, “On Baptism,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe; trans. S. Thelwal I (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight.—<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0321.htm> (accessed Dec. 13, 2021).

## From Voluntary Baptism to Infant Baptism

Sometime during the fourth century, however, the practice of voluntary baptism began to change. At the heart of this shift was the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in 312 AD, an event that slowly transformed the very nature of the Christian church. During the century after Constantine's conversion, the church went from a small, persecuted minority, far from the center of political power, to a powerful institution whose bishops relied on the armies of the Roman empire for their protection and as a means of eliminating heresy.

Gradually, Christianity became the "official" religion of the Roman emperors—a kind of religious-cultural glue that could help to unite a fragmenting empire. Since everyone within the territory was now *compelled* to be a Christian, it no longer made sense to associate baptism with repentance, a transformation of life, or with a new identity within a community of believers.

About the same time, new arguments emerged to defend the practice of infant baptism. Toward the end of the fourth century, for example, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) insisted that from the very moment of birth, human beings were trapped in bondage to sin. The baptism of infants, he argued, was necessary for the salvation of the child's soul. In his teaching, the sacramental act of baptism conferred a spiritual gift of grace to the child that incorporated the infant into the church and saved its soul from the clutches of hell.

In later medieval society, baptism also marked a child's membership into the civic community. At baptism infants were officially registered in church record books as eventual tax-paying subjects who owed allegiance to the local feudal lord.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century brought many changes ... but not to the practice of baptism. The leading Protestant reformers—Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin—all agreed that infants should be baptized at birth. Luther argued that infant baptism confirms our total dependence on God's free gift of grace for salvation. Zwingli and, later, Calvin, both taught that baptism functioned for Christians in the same way that circumcision did for the Jews of the Old Testament: it was a sign of inclusion into the body of believers and a commitment on the part of believers to raise that child in the ways of God.

So when Anabaptist leaders began to challenge the practice of infant baptism, people reacted with confusion, anger, and eventually, violence.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Reflect together on the significance of water, both as an image that occurs repeatedly in the bible and in your own life. What comes first to mind when you think about water? Why do you think water is a recurring theme in the rituals of most of the world's major religions?
2. What do think people understood baptism to mean as preached and practiced by John the Baptist? What do we learn about baptism from the story of John's baptism of Jesus? Did baptism mean something different when practiced by Jesus or the early apostles?
3. Review the summary of the meanings of baptism in the Bible. Do you agree with this list? Are there additional themes that might be added?
4. Although some Christian groups may have been practicing child baptism even before the rule of Constantine, Anabaptist-Mennonites have generally associated the rise of infant baptism with his reign and the rise of Christianity as the primary religion of the Roman emperors. Do some additional research on the larger debate among church historians about the origins of infant baptism. What arguments do you find most persuasive? Why?
5. Why do you think baptism became such a contentious issue in the history of the Christian Church?

## Prayer/Affirmation

Baptism with water in the name of the triune God  
unites believers with Christ and the church.

Through the power of the Spirit,  
we repent and turn to God in faith  
and live as transformed people.

Through the waters of baptism,  
God cleanses and renews us  
as we commit to following Jesus  
and become members of the church,  
the body of Christ,  
dying and rising to new life.

– *Voices Together*, 930

## CHAPTER 2:

# Anabaptist Understandings of Baptism

**GOAL:** To provide participants with a basic historical and theological context for understanding the practice of voluntary baptism in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition

## Context

On January 21, 1525 a small group of young people gathered secretly in the Swiss city of Zurich for an unusual worship service. They had been raised as Catholics; but for several years they had been meeting for bible study and discussion with their mentor, Ulrich Zwingli, the priest of the city's main church.

As they read Scripture together, the group began to question several practices of the Catholic church, including infant baptism. But they disagreed about the next steps. Zwingli, supported by the Zurich City Council, insisted on a course of moderate reforms, introduced slowly. But some members of the bible study group resisted. If the scriptures were clear, they argued, changes in church practice should be made immediately, regardless of the political or social consequences.

So on that January day in 1525, the small group formally renounced their baptisms as infants and, in the pattern of Jesus and John the Baptist, received baptism as adults as a symbol of their voluntary decision to follow Christ and their commitment to join together in a new life of faith.

For modern Christians, the action seems almost trivial. After all, what could be so troubling about a group of people gathering for prayer and then pouring water over their heads? Yet this action—which marked the beginning of the Anabaptist (or “re-baptizer”) movement—had profound consequences. Within days, the Zurich City Council ordered the arrest and imprisonment of anyone who participated in such baptisms. By 1526, city authorities declared the baptism of adults a capital offense. And in January of 1527, Felix Manz, in whose home the group had met, suffered the ultimate consequence of his convictions. With his hands and feet bound to a wooden pole, Manz was “baptized” once more—pushed into the icy waters of the Limmat River in a public execution.

As the Anabaptist movement spread, church and political leaders condemned them as heretics. Over the next few decades, some 3,000 believers were executed for the crime of being Anabaptists, or “re-baptizers.”

Yet the movement they started lives on. Today, nearly 2.2 million Christians around the world identify themselves as part of the Anabaptist tradition, including all of the churches that are part of Mennonite World Conference.

## **Anabaptist-Mennonite Understandings of Baptism**

For Anabaptists, the primary argument for voluntary, or believer’s, baptism rested on a bedrock principle of the Reformation itself: “scripture alone” (*sola Scriptura*). In their reading of the New Testament, they could find no scriptural justification for the practice of baptizing babies.

Instead, Jesus’ teachings explicitly linked baptism with repentance and belief—something that an infant clearly could not do. While instructing the disciples to preach the good news of the gospel, for example, Jesus promised, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16). The sequence here is clear: belief comes first, then baptism. At the end of his ministry, in a final admonition to the disciples known as the Great Commission, Jesus again spoke of baptism. “Therefore go,” he told the disciples “and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20).

Here again, the order is important. Jesus commanded his followers to first “make disciples,” and then to baptize with the expectation that the new converts would also be taught to obey Christ’s commandments. In other words, people become followers of Jesus by hearing, understanding, and responding to a call—just as the first disciples had done.

This same sequence reoccurs in the first baptisms of the apostolic church as recorded in Acts 2. The story begins with Peter preaching a sermon to a crowd of Jews who had gathered in Jerusalem for the annual celebration of the Passover. Peter ends his sermon with a call to repentance. “Those who accepted his message,” the account concludes, “were baptized” (Acts 2:41).

For Anabaptists and the groups that came after them, the commitment to follow Jesus implied a conversion or “turning around”—a radical reorientation of priorities—symbolized by baptism, that could lead to persecution and even death. This was not a decision that could be made by an infant!

## **Baptism: A Three-Stranded Cord**

Anabaptists did not believe that the act of baptism, in itself, made a person a Christian. Rather, baptism was an outward “sign” or a “symbol” of an inward transformation.

Symbols, of course, can have more than just one meaning. Drawing on a verse from 1 John 5, the Anabaptists frequently described baptism as a kind of three-



stranded cord—spirit, water, and blood—which each pointed to essential qualities of baptism:

This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement (1 John 5:6-8).

1. At its most basic level, baptism is a *visible sign of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit*. It is a public recognition that the believer has repented of sin, has accepted God’s forgiveness, and has given their life over to Christ. Baptism celebrates the gift of salvation—the gift of God’s loving, forgiving, and enabling grace.
2. At the same time, baptism is also a *sign of membership in a new community*. In the baptism of water we place ourselves into the “care, discipline and fellowship of the community.” At baptism we promise “to give and receive counsel,” to share our possessions, and to serve in the broader mission of the church. Salvation in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is never purely private or inward; our faith is always expressed in relationships with others.
3. Finally, baptism is closely related to a third theme. In baptism, new believers *promise to follow in the way of Jesus*—to live as he lived and taught, even if that includes, as it did for Jesus, misunderstanding, persecution, suffering, or even death. It is not enough just to claim the forgiveness of sins or to have your name included in a church membership list. Baptism also implies a *way of life* that looks like Jesus even if it should entail vulnerability and suffering.

Because Anabaptist-Mennonites regard baptism as a symbol—an outward sign that points to a deeper meaning—there is room for a range of emphases and practices regarding the ritual that can vary across time and cultural contexts.

## Summary:

1. The Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition regards voluntary, or believer’s, baptism as Biblical.
2. In the spirit of the Exodus, baptism marks a movement from the slavery of sin to a new life of community.
3. In the New Testament, Jesus *invited* the disciples to follow him—there was no coercion.
4. Jesus clearly linked baptism to *repentance and belief*—“believe and be baptized”—something that an infant could not do.
5. The church of Acts and the early church both practiced *voluntary* baptism.

The Anabaptists in the sixteenth century sought to recover these teachings that had gone out of focus in the history of the church. Based on these biblical insights, they understood baptism to be a sign of the Spirit’s transforming presence, a mark of membership in a community, and a commitment to follow Christ, even at great cost.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Baptism in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has had at least three distinct, though related, meanings: a) a visible sign of an inward transformation; b) membership in a new community, the church; and c) a commitment to follow Jesus in daily discipleship. Do you recognize these themes in the teaching on baptism in your congregation?
2. In your experience, has one of these themes been more significant or relevant than the others? If so, explain why. Is there a theme that you think needs to be emphasized more in your congregation's teaching on baptism?
3. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century were certain that they had good biblical foundations for their emphasis on voluntary, or believers, baptism. Why do you think this understanding of baptism was so threatening to the established churches? What was at stake that would make voluntary baptism a capital offense? What has changed since then? Does the fact that this seems absurd today suggest that baptism has become irrelevant?
4. How is the significance of baptism communicated to young people or newcomers in your congregation today? Are people regularly invited to consider baptism?

## Prayer

God of grace, creator of waters,  
your Spirit hovered over the deep.

**We remember that you separated the land from the waters  
and provided rain to freshen the ground**

We remember that you flooded the earth  
and held creatures and people above the waters.

**We remember that you parted the waters  
as your people fled from bondage in Egypt.**

We remember Jesus your Son,  
who, like all of us, arrived in the waters of childbirth.

**We remember John baptizing in the waters of the Jordan  
and the Spirit descending like a dove.**

We remember that Jesus shared our thirst  
and a Samaritan women shared from a well.

*Living Water,  
pour your Spirit upon us.  
wash us and free us from sin,  
make us flourish in every way,  
and renew your world with showers of blessing.*

– *Voices Together*, 931

## CHAPTER 3

# Anabaptist-Mennonites in Conversation with Each Other ... and with Other Christians

**GOAL:** To provide a context for understanding ongoing debates about baptism within the Anabaptist tradition, the significance of the Trilateral Dialogue on Baptism (*Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church*), and the gift that ecumenical conversations can offer.

### Context

As we have seen, baptism emerged as a major point of disagreement among the various Christian traditions that formed out of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. The most dramatic differences were with the Anabaptists who challenged the centuries-old practice of baptizing infants. But even though Luther retained the Catholic tradition of infant baptism, he defended the practice for different reasons than those put forward by Catholic theologians. And the Reformed tradition justified infant baptism with still other arguments. These, and other points of differences, ultimately led to deep divisions and violence, including the Religious Wars of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

By the end of the seventeenth century, most Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed princes no longer used their armies to promote or defend their religious convictions. And by the nineteenth century, many countries in Europe had begun to adopt the principle of religious freedom—a practice already embraced in the United States and Canada—even though the dominant churches in Europe continued to practice infant baptism.

In the meantime, the principle of voluntary baptism advocated by the Anabaptists continued to be a defining feature of a wide range of “Free Church” groups, including the Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites, along with the Baptists, the Church of the Brethren, Brethren in Christ, and many others.

Yet underneath this growing civility basic disagreements over baptism persisted.

## Differences Among Anabaptists

Some of these differences found expression within the groups who affirmed voluntary baptism. Some early participants in the Anabaptist movement, for example, seem to have regarded their (re)baptism as simply a public commitment to be more earnest and disciplined in their Christian lives, while remaining part of the Catholic Church. The Anabaptist missionary Hans Hut, who thought that Christ would return at Pentecost of 1528, baptized in the sign of the Tau, claiming that this sign on their forehead would identify them among the Elect when Christ returned in glory. Still others regarded baptism as a membership rite into a new community of believers, where financial resources were shared, church discipline was practiced, and the lines separating the community of the baptized from the “world” (including the Catholic Church) were very clear.

Even after a more-or-less shared understanding of baptism had emerged by the middle of the sixteenth century, questions still remained, especially for the second generation of Anabaptists who now were raising children who had never been baptized as infants.

**1. Age of Baptism:** The Anabaptists argued that infants possessed a spiritual innocence that ensured them God’s love and mercy. They firmly rejected the notion that a baby who died before baptism was damned to hell. But at what point did an infant reach the “age of accountability”? If baptism was primarily associated with moral awareness—a recognition of right and wrong, accompanied by a sense of guilt and remorse for wrongdoing—then it made sense to baptize young children, who were fully capable of making moral choices and were, therefore, “accountable.” But if baptism was linked to more complex understandings—theological claims made in a confession of faith, for example, or a commitment to a life of Christian discipleship, or a willingness to endure persecution—then the age of baptism should presumably be much older. Some even noted that Jesus was not baptized until the age of 30, and reserved baptism for full-fledged adults.

Implicit in these uncertainties regarding the appropriate age of baptism were the questions raised by Catholics and Lutherans: exactly how, they asked, does an Anabaptist-Mennonite congregation—or, for that matter, an individual—know when a person is “ready” for baptism? What sort of evidence is needed to demonstrate Christian maturity? In what sense is a choice ever completely “voluntary”?

**2. Preparation for Baptism:** In a similar way, groups in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition have not always agreed about the level of instruction, or catechism, that is needed prior to baptism. The earliest Anabaptist baptisms seem to have followed the example in Acts 8 of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch—baptism followed almost as soon as the person who heard the gospel repented of their sin and expressed a desire to follow in the way of Jesus. Instruction on doctrine and practices would happen after baptism.

But within only a few months of the first baptisms in 1525, there is evidence that baptism was generally preceded by a period of instruction. Initially, this instruction seems to have been based on a concordance of bible verses, organized around themes of particular theological relevance. Over time, the catechism became more formal, so that by the late 1600s some Anabaptist groups had formalized instruction to include a series of questions and answers, and a liturgy of baptismal vows intended to demonstrate a certain level of understanding. Today, the nature of instruction prior to baptism varies widely: some churches still baptize almost immediately after a public statement of conversion; most require some period of formal instruction lasting from a few weeks to a year. Some Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations require that every baptized person have a mentor—a kind of “godparent”—who vouches publicly for the integrity of their commitment; and a few congregations even have annual “recovenanting” services that remind all baptized members that maturity in faith is a lifelong commitment.

**3. Mode of Baptism:** Another internal debate has sometimes emerged around the ritual of baptism itself. On the one hand, as we have seen, most Anabaptist-related groups insisted that the act of baptism was a symbol or sign—“the outward sign,” in the words of Pilgram Marpeck, “of an inward transformation.” This led some to conclude that since the ritual did not have a transformative effect in itself, then perhaps it should not matter exactly how it was carried out—it was “only” a symbol.

Over time, at least three different modes of baptism have emerged among Anabaptist groups:

1. *Sprinkling* (or aspersion), in which a small amount of water is symbolically sprinkled over the baptismal candidate;
2. *Pouring* (or affusion), which involves a larger amount of water, usually drenching the head of the baptismal candidate;
3. *Immersion*, in which the entire body of the candidate is submerged under water.

Arguments for each mode appeal to biblical or historical precedent.<sup>4</sup> Sprinkling generally refers to the cleansing aspect of baptism (e.g., Psalm 51:7, “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow”). Pouring evokes anointing or the pouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:45-47). And immersion points to the image of being buried and resurrected in Christ (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12). Whereas most Anabaptist-related groups are relatively flexible on the mode of baptism, some—notably the Mennonite Brethren—have strongly advocated for immersion, with some congregations even requiring new members who were previously baptized by sprinkling or pouring to be (re)baptized by immersion.

Later chapters will address additional questions that have emerged for groups in the Anabaptist tradition. But the appropriate age of baptism, along with questions around baptismal instruction and the mode of baptism, have likely been the most consistent pastoral concerns.

## Healing the Wounds of the Reformation?

An even deeper divide has persisted in the Christian church between groups in the Anabaptist tradition and churches that continue to practice infant baptism. To be sure, most Christians today relate to each other in friendly ways as neighbors. But in some settings—especially where Catholicism or Orthodoxy is the dominant religion—Anabaptist-Mennonites have regarded their Catholic and Orthodox neighbors as a mission field. Indeed, among Spanish-speakers, it is not uncommon to distinguish between “Christians” (*crístianos*) and “Catholics” (*católicos*).

By the same token, many people in the larger Lutheran, Catholic, or Orthodox traditions still regard Anabaptist-Mennonites as a “sect.” And the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530), which continues to serve the global Lutheran church as an authoritative statement of their faith, explicitly “condemns” Anabaptists.

Against this backdrop the agreement in 2012 by Catholic, Lutheran, and Mennonite leaders to enter into a three-way conversation on the topic of baptism was truly a significant event. The initiative did not come out of the blue. In 1999 a decade-long effort by Lutherans and Catholics to find common ground had culminated in the landmark “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.” Mennonites had also participated in a dialogue with Catholics (1998-2003), that resulted in a shared statement titled “Called to be Peacemakers.” A similar dialogue, with Lutherans (2005-2008), produced “Healing of Memories: Reconciling in Christ,” which laid the groundwork for several deeply moving moments of reconciliation, first in 2009 at

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek origin of the word for baptism (*baptízein*; *baptizo*) generally refers to “cleansing,” which doesn’t resolve the question.

<sup>5</sup> “Baptism and Incorporation in the Body of Christ, the Church” includes numerous references to both “Called to be Peacemakers” and “Healing of Memories,” as well as to the 1999 Catholic-Lutheran “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ).”



the MWC Assembly in Asuncion, Paraguay, and then at the global assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2010.<sup>5</sup>

The trilateral conversations that took place among Mennonites, Lutherans, and Catholics between 2012 and 2017 did not resolve deeply held differences regarding baptism. Rather, the intention was to listen to each other with patience and empathy, open to the possibility that different understandings of baptism could not only divide, but also enrich each of the groups.

Not surprisingly, the report that emerged from the conversation underscored many of the ongoing differences regarding baptism among the three churches. But it also revealed significant—and, in some cases, surprising—areas of common ground, and concluded with a summary of “gifts received” from the other groups.

The real work coming out of the dialogue, however, lies in the sections titled “challenges accepted” and “for consideration.” Mennonites, for example, accepted the challenge of “making the remembrance of our baptism a lifelong motif of discipleship” (§129) and of formulating “a fuller theology of the child, particularly with regard to the age of accountability and the salvific status of older children who have reached the age of accountability” (§130). Perhaps most challenging, Mennonite representatives—building on a deeper understanding of the centrality of baptism to a life of faith in the Lutheran and Catholic traditions—proposed that Anabaptist-Mennonite churches consider “receiving members from infant baptism churches on the basis of their confession of faith and commitment to discipleship without repeating the water rite” (133).

The chapters that follow summarize some of the key points that emerged from the Trilateral Dialogue, inviting Anabaptist-Mennonites to share in that conversation and in the on-going task of discerning the leading of the Spirit regarding baptism in our context today.

## Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the assumptions around baptism—e.g., age of baptism; preparation; mode—in your congregation today? Are these settled questions? Have there been changes in attitudes or practices over time in the church (or in yourself) regarding these questions?
2. Many congregations have people who are cognitively impaired among their regular attenders. What would be your congregation’s response if such a person requested baptism?
3. How do you explain the concepts of sin and salvation to children in your congregation? What is communicated to children in your church regarding their status before God?
4. Traditionally, Anabaptist-Mennonite churches have spoken of the “age of accountability” as the point at which young people raised in the church should start to consider baptism. What is meant by this phrase? At what point does the innocence of childhood transition into spiritual accountability?
5. If you were participating in an ecumenical conversation with Catholics or Lutherans, would you be able to represent the Anabaptist-Mennonite position with examples from your congregation? How open would you be about the on-going questions or debates that Anabaptist-Mennonites still have about baptism (e.g., age, instruction, mode)?

## Prayer/Congregational Commitment at Baptism

As we now receive you into the fellowship of the church,  
we make this covenant with you,  
and we renew our own covenant with God.

We pledge to bear each other’s burdens,  
to assist in times of need,  
to share our gifts and possessions,  
to forgive as Christ has forgiven,  
to support each other in times of joy and sorrow,  
and in all things to work for the common good,  
thus proclaiming the presence of Christ among us  
so that our lives may glorify God.

Holy Spirit, make us one body,  
part of the church worldwide,  
united in its diversity, now and in every age. Amen.

– *Voices Together*, 932

## CHAPTER 4

# The Trilateral Dialogue: Understandings of Sin, Salvation, Grace, and Faith<sup>6</sup>

**GOAL:** To introduce readers to Lutheran, Catholic, and Mennonite understandings of sin, salvation, and grace in the life of the believer.

### Context

Throughout human history, most people have experienced some sense of God, or Transcendence, or “the Holy.” They might describe this reality in many different ways, but a fundamental question in virtually every human society comes down to some variation of how, exactly, do human beings connect with the Divine?

That question assumes, of course, that there is something that *separates* humans from God—that we are aware of a barrier or divide that must somehow be overcome. The Christian tradition calls this barrier “sin.” If sin points to all of the ways that humans are separated or alienated from God, “salvation” describes the way in which human relationships with God and with each other are restored. Most Christians, regardless of group or affiliation, would agree with this very basic beginning point.

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<sup>6</sup> Portions of this chapter draw heavily on Thomas Yoder Neufeld’s “Study Guide for Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.”—<https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/images/d/d3/YoderBaptismStudyGuide2021.pdf>.

Differences, however, quickly emerge when we start to look closer at the details. What exactly, for example, is the nature of sin? And how is sin to be overcome? How does salvation happen? How is it made visible or real? What changes as a result of a restored relationship with God?

If we are going to understand Catholic, Lutheran, and Mennonite perspectives on baptism, it will help to begin by exploring their different understandings of sin—how humans are separated from God and from each other—and how this separation is overcome.

What follows is a very simplified description of these understandings, drawn largely from “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church,” the report of the trilateral conversation on baptism.

## **Catholic, Lutheran, and Mennonite Understandings of Sin**

Both the Catholic and the Lutheran tradition begin with a very sober—some would say pessimistic; others might say realistic—appraisal of human nature. According to the Catholic understanding, especially as it was expressed in the Council of Trent (1546), all human beings are born under the power of evil. Humans are, by nature, sinful. As descendants of Adam, the guilt of Adam’s “original sin”—the reality of our alienation from God—is transmitted to all human beings. There is nothing in human nature that can remedy this. Sin, therefore, is not so much an act as it is a condition.

The Lutheran view is very similar. According to Martin Luther, from the very moment of our birth humans enter the world estranged from God. We are not just ignorant or naive about how to relate to God; rather, every aspect of our nature—our reason, desires, affections, emotions, and longings—is actively opposed to God. Instead of trusting in God, human beings are fundamentally turned toward themselves; we look for our own benefit in everything we do.

Most Anabaptist-Mennonites would not disagree with the assertion that humans are predisposed to sin. But they have not given this condition the same priority as Lutherans and Catholics. “Because of sin,” the current North American Mennonite confession of faith states, “all have fallen short of the Creator’s intent, marred the image of God in which they were created, disrupted order in the world, and limited their love for others.”<sup>7</sup> Further, “Through sin, the powers of domination, division, destruction, and death have been unleashed in humanity and in all of creation.” The crucial difference, however, is that Anabaptist-Mennonites have not generally understood sin in terms of the “bondage of the will”—in which even the human desire to be restored to fellowship with God is an act of human pride. In the Anabaptist tradition, “only conscious acts have the quality of obedience or disobedience, faith

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<sup>7</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Art. 7 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1995), 46-47.—<https://www.mennoniteusa.org/who-are-mennonites/what-we-believe/confession-of-faith> (accessed Dec. 12, 2021).

or sin, and it is only when we are sinning consciously and deliberately that this inborn tendency may be understood as ‘original sin.’” [§34]. Anabaptist-Mennonites do not deny the reality of sin or even the inherited tendency to sin; but they did not accept this tendency toward sinning as an inevitable fate.<sup>8</sup>

## **Summary: Common Perspectives and Differences Regarding Sin**

All three communions agree on “original sin” as an unavoidable beginning point for any conversation about the human condition—humans are both naturally and willfully alienated from God. All agree that “sin is a power before us, behind us, and around us” [§44]. And all recognize that individual sinful actions are often embedded structures and systems of evil that also shape our alienation from the will of God [§39].

But the three traditions differ in small, but significant, ways in their understanding of the human captivity to sin. Lutherans and Catholics assert that every aspect of human nature is actively and inevitably oriented away from God. Anabaptist-Mennonites believe that God has granted human beings the ability to choose and to act—to accept or reject the means God provides for overcoming our inherently sinful nature. These differences have significant consequences for how each of the three groups understands “salvation” or the restoration of human fellowship with God, and the role that baptism plays in that process.

## **Catholic, Lutheran, and Mennonite Understandings of Grace and Salvation**

Differences among the three Christian traditions are more pronounced when it comes to the question of how the relationship between humans and God is restored. All begin with a fundamental agreement that “sin can only be overcome by grace, by the divine initiative, by the Holy Spirit” [§46]. This is an important point, since Mennonites and Catholics are sometimes accused of “works righteousness”—that is, believing that humans can achieve salvation through their own good deeds. Both Mennonites and Catholics have argued that this is *not* the case: salvation comes to humanity through God’s initiative and through God’s grace.

But there are important differences in just how this relationship is to be understood. In brief, Lutherans stress “human passivity,” since they hold that humans are entirely incapable of participating in their salvation. Catholics, by contrast, stress some level of “human cooperation” in salvation.

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<sup>8</sup> “Mennonites thus speak of sin in several related ways: sins that are committed deliberately as a result of an “inborn tendency” to sin and “structural sin” as manifested, for example, in pervasive violence, which implicates persons in collective rebellion against the will of God for human life” [§39].

Anabaptist-Mennonites leave the most room for the “human role,” since they believe that God’s grace enables humans to choose and to act [§46]. They ascribe this capacity to make choices, either good or sinful, to God’s “prevenient grace” bestowed on all humanity [§35].<sup>9</sup> Humans were created to live in intimacy and harmony—what the Old Testament writers call *Shalom*—with God, with each other, and with Creation. Those relationships of intimacy have been disrupted by sin. But God keeps inviting us back to our original identity. Moreover, God has made it possible, through the resurrection of Christ and the reign of the Spirit, for us to be restored to the *Shalom* for which we were created. Although our “inborn tendency to sin is never entirely overcome, [we] have been set free to obey God (see Rom. 8:10-13)” [§36].

In the Anabaptist understanding, salvation implies both a change in the person’s “standing before God” and a “metamorphosis of the person in a moral sense” (Rom. 7 and 8; 2 Cor. 3:17-18; 5:11-21; Eph. 2:8-10) [§38]. Believers are forgiven and transformed into persons who can follow Jesus and obey his teachings. Some Christians speak of this aspect of salvation as “sanctification,” a conscious surrender to God’s promise and Jesus’ example that results in a transformed life [§38]. Believers do not do this on their own strength, which inevitably leads to legalism. But through the Spirit at work within us we can participate in that restoration. The Anabaptist Schleithem Confession of 1527 underscores the close association of baptism with this God-given ability to accept (or reject) God’s free gift of grace:

Baptism shall be given to all those who have been taught repentance and the amendment of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away, and to all who desire to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ... [§40].

In the Anabaptist tradition, salvation—and the transformed way of life that follows—is always a work of the Holy Spirit. But God does not coerce humans into conversion; ultimately, the gift of grace that is offered freely must be accepted voluntarily.

For Anabaptist-Mennonites, water baptism is not conversion per se but it marks a “recapitulation” of the believer’s conversion through the Spirit. It is an “outward and public testimony of the inward baptism of the Spirit” [§40].<sup>10</sup>

- A. Water baptism is God’s act insofar as it “represents” and “completes” the deliverance and transformation in the believer’s life through the Spirit [§40, 48].
- B. Baptism is the believer’s act in that it is a “pledge,” “testimony,” or “witness” [§40, 42, 48], a solemn promise to follow Christ as part of the body of Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> Prevenient grace is a grace that comes before any human decision or endeavor. It has sometimes been described as “the love of God wooing us; the will of God drawing us; the desire of God pursuing us; the gift of God freeing us; the activity of God empowering us.”

<sup>10</sup> This summary comes from Thomas Yoder Neufeld’s “Study Guide for Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.”—<https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/images/d/d3/YoderBaptismStudyGuide2021.pdf>.



- C. Last, baptism is the act of a local congregation representing Christ's universal body as "the agent of the Spirit" [§40, 48]. The congregation tests the integrity of the believer's confession and change of life, and it administers baptism as "the testimony of the Spirit" [§42].

Anabaptist-Mennonites conclude from this that infants should not be baptized. Infants are unable to experience or express the "inner processes" of repentance, faith, or promise of following Jesus [§48]. Nevertheless, they are embraced by God's grace [§41]. They "remain innocent" and are "heirs of salvation" until they are old enough to discern the nature of the decision and the consequences of a life committed to Christ.

To sum up the Mennonite perspective:<sup>11</sup>

- A. Humanity, along with all creation, is "infected by sin" and burdened with a "tendency to sin."
- B. The idea of "structural sin" and pervasive violence helps to understand how choices function within a larger context that influences those choices.
- C. Nevertheless, sin is associated with a conscious choice or decision; babies who are incapable of making choices are not to be understood as sinners.
- D. God's grace makes it possible for humans to make bad choices, but also to seek God.
- E. The Spirit of God collaborates with humans in their coming to faith, in their conversion, in their experience of forgiveness, and in their decision to follow Jesus within the body of Christ.
- F. Baptism is a public sign of God's work in the person's life. It marks a transformation and a pledge to faithfully participate in the life and mission of the church.

Despite these differences, the Trilateral Report notes many areas of convergence among the three churches. All three groups, for example, agree that baptism plays a decisive role in communicating God's saving grace [§47]. They agree on the connection between baptism, forgiveness of sin, and the transformation of the baptized person [§50-54]. They agree that the struggle with sin is an ongoing reality for the baptized. Finally, as we will see in the next chapter, they agree that baptism leads to a transformed life expressed in "good works" (Eph. 2:8-10) [§54].<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> All three traditions also affirmed that even though the Bible gives a clear command to baptize (e.g., Matt. 28:19-20), it is possible that salvation could be extended to people who, for various reasons, have not been baptized—God's drive to save (1 Tim 2:4) goes beyond human understanding [§49].

## Questions for Reflection

1. Does the Report accurately reflect your own understanding of Mennonite or Anabaptist teaching on sin, grace, conversion, and baptism?
2. What new light does the Report bring to your understanding of baptism as it relates to sin and grace? Does it encourage you to deepen and strengthen your appreciation of your own baptism?
3. What do you appreciate in the Catholic and Lutheran understandings of baptism in relation to sin and grace? Are there new insights that lead you to a deeper understanding of how Catholic and Lutheran sisters and brothers view baptism, including that of infants, and why it is important to them? Are there any insights here that might be relevant for Anabaptists-Mennonites?
4. What do you find puzzling or even troubling in Catholic and Lutheran perspectives from the perspective of your own convictions, beliefs, or reading of the Bible?
5. Despite the importance of the link between baptism and membership in the church, all three groups also agree that the “inscrutable ways of the loving mercy of God” (Rom 11:33; 1 Tim 2:4) also reaches those who “through no fault of their own” have not been baptized [§75]. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

## Prayer/Reaffirmation of Baptismal Commitments

God of covenant,  
when Jesus came up from the waters of baptism  
you claimed him as your beloved child.  
Through Jesus  
you claim everyone who comes to you as your beloved.  
As at baptism,  
We confess our faith in you today.

By your Spirit,  
I will abide in your Word  
as wisdom for my life.

By your Spirit,  
I will give and receive counsel  
in the circle of your church.

By your Spirit,  
I will live without giving in to violence  
and take risks for what is good.

By your Spirit,  
I will share in your mission for the world  
with courage and hope.

Strengthen us, God of love,  
bind us together as your baptized people,  
through Jesus Christ,  
who live and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever, Amen.

– *Voices Together*, 935

## CHAPTER 5

# Sacrament or Symbol? Faith and the Ritual of Baptism<sup>13</sup>

**GOAL:** To better understand each group's view on what actually happens at baptism ... and why the ritual of baptism matters.

The varying emphases in how each group understands sin, human nature, and salvation noted in the previous chapter are closely related to how Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites understand the role of baptism. All three communions agree that the ritual of baptism goes back to Christ's clear instructions in the Great Commission (Matt 28:19). All agree that the basic rite of baptism includes the following components: the proclamation of the Word; a renunciation of sin; a public profession of faith; and water baptism in the name of the Trinity [§63]. And, not least, Catholics, Lutherans, and Anabaptist-Mennonites all affirm that God is active in baptism—that “something happens” in celebration of the rite [§69].

Differences emerge, however, in their explanations of what, exactly, it is that occurs at the moment of baptism. Our traditions have also differed in their understandings of how baptism is related to faith, church membership, or the daily life of a Christian disciple. Disagreements on these crucial questions have sometimes led to painful mutual condemnations—either in explicit language (as in the Lutheran Augsburg Confession), or by implication (as with the Anabaptist insistence on “re”-baptizing).

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<sup>13</sup> Portions of this chapter draw heavily on Thomas Yoder Neufeld's “Study Guide for Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.” —<https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/images/d/d3/YoderBaptismStudyGuide2021.pdf>.

## Sacrament or Symbol?

Both Catholics and Lutherans regard baptism as a “sacrament.” In the Christian tradition, a sacrament is a religious ceremony that imparts God’s grace through the performance of the ritual itself, independent of the qualities of the person receiving the sacrament. A sacrament is, by definition, a *divine* action—mediated by humans, to be sure—but not dependent in any way on the recipient for its effect. Thus, in a Catholic or Lutheran context, the very act of baptism confers God’s grace, forgiveness, and salvation to a newborn baby or an adult convert.

When Mennonites speak of baptism as a “symbol,” they too believe that “something happens.” But for them baptism is an external, visible *representation*, a sign, of what is truly important in the life of a new believers. More specifically, baptism is a symbol of an inward transformation and a commitment to follow Jesus in the company of the Christian community. Like a wedding vow, baptism celebrates the new identity of the person being baptized. Something *real* happens at baptism. But just as a wedding vow is not the same as a marriage, baptism in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition does not in itself bring about salvation. Rather, it is a symbol of God’s gift of forgiveness, a mark of one’s membership in a community of believer, and a pledge of a life of faithfulness to Christ.

### To summarize:

- a. For *Catholics*, the ritual of baptism, performed by an ordained priest, literally “communicates” or bestows the grace of Christ. At its deepest level, it is actually Christ who baptizes, or rather, the “mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members” [§69, 70].
- b. For *Lutherans*: The “efficacy” of baptism is based on God’s promise, given through the sacrament of baptism, “performed through human actions and words” [§69].
- c. For *Mennonites*, baptism is not merely a “sign,” pointing to the work of Christ and “inviting” participation in the life of Christ. It is also the occasion for both the person baptized and the community to experience “effectual change.” This change must be “verified,” however, in the faith and life of the baptized person [§69, 70].

Catholics and Lutherans stress “the instrumental nature of the sacrament” [§71]. Since Catholics and Lutherans view baptism as first and foremost God’s act to save and renew, they regard the baptism of infants as “not only possible but required,” something that is “needed for their salvation” [§49]. Indeed, baptizing infants expresses clearly the “absolute gratuity” of grace [§62]. To “re”-baptize someone who has already experienced the divine act of renewal as a child or infant is to deny God’s gracious initiative [§61].

## Baptism and Faith

Although this might come as a surprise for Mennonites, all three communions agree that baptism and faith are “intimately and inseparably related” [§72]. For Catholics and Lutherans, who believe infants “can and should” be baptized since it is “necessary for salvation” [§73], faith is important in the following ways:<sup>14</sup>

*Lutherans* quote Martin Luther: “Without faith baptism is of no use. . . .” When Jesus says that it is children who inherit the kingdom of God (Mark 10:15), he was affirming that even an infant has faith and trusts in God’s promise [§74]. It is an embryonic faith, to be sure—a faith that needs to be nurtured by the faith of parents and godparents. But it is faith.

*Catholics* also stress that baptism is a “sacrament of faith” [§74], in that the infant is born into a community of faith—the faith of parents and the Church—which actively nurtures and forms the faith of the child.

Faith is also central to the *Mennonite* understanding of “believer’s baptism.” However, they believe that only those who are able to profess their own faith and understand the “basic meaning and implications” of their faith should be baptized [§74].

All three groups agree that the church is the context in which this faith is shared, nurtured, and grows.

## The Ritual of Baptism

These distinctive understandings are reflected in the ways that each tradition carries out the actual ceremony of baptism.

- A. *Catholics* celebrate baptism with numerous elements: sign of the cross on the forehead; proclamation of the Word eliciting the response of faith; exorcism; anointing with oil; invocation of the Spirit over the water; recitation of the creed; triple immersion or pouring with the trinitarian formula; anointing with oil; clothing with white garment to symbolize “putting on Christ;” a candle signifying Christ as light of the world; the “Ephphetha” prayer for the opening of ear and mouth; the Lord’s Prayer; and a concluding blessing [§64]. Most important is the profession of faith and the baptism with water in the name of the Trinity [§65].

For Catholics, baptism cannot be separated from another sacrament—namely, confirmation. Confirmation is a ritual of initiation into the Catholic Church, usually around the age of 7, that acknowledges a process of growth in the baptized infant in which parents and godparents play a critical role [§65].

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Thomas Yoder Neufeld’s “Study Guide for Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.”—<https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/images/d/d3/YoderBaptismStudyGuide2021.pdf>.

B. *Lutherans* include many of these elements, but have added Martin Luther's "Flood Prayer," which makes a connection between baptism and both Noah's flood and the Exodus from Egypt. Lutherans typically read the Great Commission of Matthew 28 and Jesus' calling of children in Mark 10. The Lutheran baptism liturgy places the central emphasis on God's agency. In Luther's words, "it is not baptism that justifies or benefits anyone, but it is faith in the word of promise to which baptism is added. This faith justifies, and fulfills that which baptism signifies." [§66]. Faith is trust in that promise.

Like Catholics, Lutherans also have a service of confirmation—sometimes called an "affirmation of baptism"—that includes a period of instruction and is understood to be a mature and public reaffirmation of the faith.

C. *Mennonites* celebrate baptism in a wide variety of ways. A request to be baptized, catechetical instruction, congregational testing, and approval of the request all precede baptism. Baptism itself could be done by sprinkling, effusion, or immersion, depending on the group; but all forms of baptism are preceded by a personal confession of sin, a personal experience of grace and forgiveness, a commitment to Christ and congregation, and an understanding that baptism is a response to God's gracious initiative to save. Regardless of the mode of baptism it is always voluntary, or "believers' baptism" [§67].

Mennonites regard the local congregation as "an expression of the Church universal, the body of Christ" [§67]. In Mennonite contexts, it is the congregation that carries the responsibility to test, evaluate, and affirm the fitness of the candidate. A typical Mennonite baptism service includes the entire congregation, usually as part of Sunday worship. Scriptures are read (e.g., Matthew 28; Romans 6; 1 Peter 3; 2 Corinthians 5), the candidate for baptism gives a public expression of faith, and a pastor or designated person baptizes with water in the name of the Trinity. The baptismal celebration concludes with the Lord's prayer, a blessing, and often communion, serving as a welcome into the body of Christ [§67].

Many Mennonite congregations also practice some form of infant dedication, in which both the parents and the congregation make a public commitment to nurture the child in the context of Christian faith, in the hope that the child will someday commit to baptism and a vocation of Christian service. Ecumenical conversations have frequently noted the symmetry between infant dedication and infant baptism on the one hand, and confirmation and voluntary baptism on the other.

## Baptism Cannot Be Repeated

All three communions agree that baptism cannot be repeated [§68], an agreement that also exposes one of the deepest disagreements:<sup>15</sup>

- A. *Catholics* believe that “it is Christ who baptizes; a human being cannot nullify the action of Christ by ‘re-baptizing’ another.” Such an act can have no theological “reality,” since it would stand “in opposition to the action of Christ” [§68].
- B. *Lutherans* view re-baptism as “distrust in God’s promise, [that makes] God a liar” [§68].
- C. Even though *Mennonites* have adopted the term “Anabaptism” (re-baptism) as a positive label, they too hold that baptism cannot be repeated. Since infant baptism is not preceded by a personal profession of faith, Mennonites traditionally have not recognized it as an actual baptism [§68]. This position has been a source of pain to many Catholics and Lutherans since it raises the question as to whether or not Mennonites recognize them as fellow Christians.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Thomas Yoder Neufeld’s “Study Guide for Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.”—<https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/images/d/d3/YoderBaptismStudyGuide2021.pdf>.



## Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. How is baptism celebrated in your setting? Were you baptized by immersion? By pouring or sprinkling? Do you think that the mode of baptism is important?
2. What do you think “happened” at your baptism? Should something have happened that didn’t?
3. What do you think of a wedding as an analogy for what Mennonites believe happens in baptism? Marriage is the formal public blessing of a commitment that fundamentally changes the status of those getting married—the two become “one flesh.” But the falling in love, the growing desire to share life, the testing of the decision, all precede the life-changing celebration. And the wedding ceremony is only the beginning of the marriage, which is to last a lifetime. It requires daily living out, as well as moments of intentional remembering and even renewal.
4. Catholics and Lutherans believe that in baptism God acts supernaturally to communicate grace and salvation. What do you see as the potential strengths of a “sacramental” view of baptism? What are the potential weaknesses?
5. Since all three communions agree that baptism cannot be repeated, do you see any way to resolve the conflict created when Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations (re)baptize new members who were baptized as infants?

## Prayer for those Preparing for Baptism

God of wanderers and seekers,  
we pray for those who are exploring faith  
and those preparing for baptism.

Be with them in their questioning,  
in their doubting,  
and in their wondering.

Be with them in their confidence,  
in their desires,  
and in their hopes.

Be with us in our common life  
And guide our counsel.

Open us to faith as it grows  
in ways both familiar and new  
so that we may journey together  
as your beloved children.

We ask this in the name of Jesus  
who prayed that we might be one  
by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

– *Voices Together*, 934

## CHAPTER 6

# Baptism and the Church<sup>16</sup>

**GOAL:** To better understand the distinctive ways that each tradition views the relationship between baptism and church membership—or “incorporation into the Body of Christ, the church.”

In the earliest years of the Anabaptist movement, the meaning of voluntary baptism was still somewhat fluid. But one theme shared by nearly every Anabaptist group was a conviction that baptism carried with it a new social identity—baptism implied membership into a new community. The earliest statement of expectations for new members was very specific: the “brother and sisters” were to meet 3 or 4 times a week for mutual exhortation; when they read Scripture, the one with the best understanding should explain the meaning of the text; members who faltered should be admonished in love; members should share all of their material possessions; they should avoid gluttony; and they should celebrate the Lord’s Supper regularly as a reminder that the time might come when they, like Christ, would need to suffer for their faith.

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<sup>16</sup> Portions of this chapter draw heavily on Thomas Yoder Neufeld’s “Study Guide for Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.”—<https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/images/d/d3/YoderBaptismStudyGuide2021.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> For the full text of the earliest congregational order of the Swiss Anabaptists, see Werner Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings: Communitarian Experiments during the Reformation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 303-310.

This strong sense of baptism as a rite of passage into a new community was not unique to the Anabaptists. Indeed, all three groups regard baptism as a response to God's call to a lifelong participation in the church. Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites alike view the body of Christ as the place and context in which baptism is lived out. All stress that every baptized person is called "to committed participation in the life of the Church and that the faith of the individual is formed and matured within the Church as a communion of believers" [§78]. This happens, they agree, through discipleship nurtured by rites (sacraments/ordinances), teaching and preaching, and by mutual accountability and correction the community provides [§95].

At the same time, however, each tradition has understood the relationship between baptism and the Christian community in somewhat different ways.

## **Baptism as Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church**

*Lutherans* and *Catholics* agree that in baptism one becomes a member of the body of Christ. The newly baptized person, whether adult or infant, now belongs to the Church. The principal task of the community is to provide "formation," which goes on throughout life. This is most obviously so in the case of infants, where personal response and commitment comes after baptism [§77].

- A. For *Catholics* baptism takes place within the "catholic" (universal) community of the Church, founded by Christ. This community was led first by the apostle Peter, chosen by Christ, and then through a process of "apostolic succession" by a series of popes. *Catholics* tend to focus less on baptism as the path to church membership than as a gateway to the sacraments it celebrates. Baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist are the three "sacraments of initiation" [§65, 91] Membership in the church means, first of all, receiving these and other sacraments. Baptism means "preparing oneself, with the help of God's grace, to receive the sacraments in such a way that one is open to be transformed by their divinely promised effectiveness" [§91]. Baptized persons practice or live out baptism within this community in a variety of ways. First, "absolutely essential for living out one's baptism" is regular participation in the Eucharist, "the source and summit of the life of the church" [§101]. Second, giving further structure and vibrancy to Catholic life is liturgy more generally, including the liturgical year in which the communion of the saints is recalled for inspiration and direction. Third, Catholics stress the importance of the "life-long endeavor" of "formation." The baptized are formed through liturgy, preaching, Eucharist, catechesis, Bible study, seminars, prayer groups, and pilgrimages. In more theological language, Catholics claim that "baptism associate[s] the baptized person with the *tria munera* or threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. Living out baptism means, therefore, witnessing to the word of God (prophet), offering one's life as a spiritual sacrifice (priest), and promoting in society the reign of God (king)" [§91]. This calls the disciple to the mission of

evangelism, both internally in building up the body of Christ and externally in both speaking to the “ills of society” and in “inviting others to faith in Jesus Christ.”

- B. For *Lutherans* perhaps the most important “living out” of baptism is trust—faith in the One who offers the word of promise and gives himself in baptism. But to learn who that One is requires the nurture of godparents, catechetical instruction, and participation in worship. These serve to lead the child to being able to confirm their trust and commitment to living out that faith within the life of the church. The rite of confirmation, introduced in the eighteenth century, serves as that milestone [§98]. Once confirmed, baptized persons are able to receive Holy Communion, and are also eligible to serve as godparents and in the *presbyterium* (as an “elder”) of congregation and synod. Lutherans recognize, as do Mennonites and Catholics, that to be confirmed to such a life can have “far-reaching consequences,” as it did, for example, for those who chose confirmation over membership in youth movements during the Hitler or East German communist eras [§100]. In order to fully participate in that “priesthood of all,” there should be “continuous formation,” so as to “become knowledgeable about right preaching and the administration of the sacraments, and about the right practice of *diakonia* and pastoral care in the church” [§99].
- C. *Anabaptists-Mennonites* also understand baptism to be inseparable from church membership [§77]. Baptism is the believer’s “incorporation” into a local community of believers, which has tested and affirmed the believer’s readiness for such a necessarily “free and voluntary” step of joining the church, and participating in the ongoing relationship of mutual accountability with other members of a congregation. At the same time, God’s grace is fully acknowledged as enabling such a “deeply personal” life-changing choice.

Mennonites understand “participation in the life of the church” as discipleship, nurture, and accountability within a local congregation. Echoing the Catholic emphasis on formation, Mennonites speak of “preparation” already prior to baptism, so that candidates for baptism can be instructed in the meaning of salvation, conversion, the Biblical story, the Anabaptist tradition, and especially what being a follower of Jesus in the world. Candidates for baptism learn what it means both to receive and offer congregational counsel and correction, and to practice mutual care for each other. Such instruction is life-long, communicated through worship, Lord’s Supper, and other forms of community life and celebration [§92, §93].

Particularly relevant in a time of migration, racism, and struggles over diversity, baptism initiates a believer into a “new people” that transcends nationalism, gender, class, and social status. [§96]. The “rule of Christ” (Matt. 18:15-20) has played a central role in the discipleship nurtured in Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations. When Mennonites insist on an “ecclesiology of the visible church” they are referring to a visible community of mutual accountability. Whereas mutual accountability can at times seem punitive, and while it might find expression in exclusion, “the

purpose of accountability is to heal and restore through repentance and not punish or condemn” [§96].

In order to emphasize the importance of the communal nature of discipleship growing out of baptism, Mennonites make a strong claim:

There is no private salvation; it happens in the fellowship of believers. The vertical and the horizontal dimensions of salvation do not exist independently from each other. There is no peace with God without peace with sisters and brothers, no fellowship with God without sharing of possessions, no divine forgiveness without willingness to forgive human offenders. [§97]

Since baptism for Mennonites is strongly associated with membership in a local congregation, there is little precedent in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition for baptizing new converts “generically” as Christians. From a Mennonite perspective, baptism apart from an identity with a local congregation suggests either that the very act of baptism “saves” a person—i.e., that baptism is a sacrament conferring salvation—or that baptism is a private act devoid of any public significance or congregational accountability. Both of these alternatives seem unacceptable.

At the same time, arguments in favor of “generic” baptisms should not be simply dismissed out of hand. After all, some people have argued, Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, apparently in private and without any clear accountability to a local congregation; and the household baptisms mentioned elsewhere in the book of Acts do not give prominent emphasis to congregational involvements.

Nonetheless, in the Great Commission Jesus made it clear that baptism was closely linked to instruction (“teaching them to observe all things”); and nothing in scripture suggests that the Christian life is that of a free floating individualist. A Mennonite understanding of the New Testament frames the Christian walk clearly within a context of other believers: we come to know Christ, we mature in our faith, and we deepen in our understanding of God’s will and purpose for the world through our fellowship within the gathered body of believers.

Anabaptist-Mennonites also recognize that the church is bigger than just their denomination. So baptism, like faith, always has a universal as well as a particular quality to it. With other Christians around the world we share in the universal message of love, forgiveness, and discipleship that comes as a gift from the Holy Spirit; but at the same time, we cannot fully understand or express this universal truth apart from concrete, particular, local, day-to-day interactions with other believers.

For these reasons, Mennonites clearly associate baptism with membership into a congregation. Traditionally, if a person moves to a new community, the home church customarily sends a “letter of transfer” to their new congregation, attesting to the individual’s faith, identifying specific gifts and encouraging the process of incorporation into the new church. None of this is intended to be coercive or controlling—the Mennonite church is a free and voluntary association. But it does

express a deep awareness that, in baptism, you have committed yourself to a particular group of people; and it gives tangible expression to the interdependent nature of faith. Indeed, many newcomers regard the high value placed on congregational participation as an attractive feature of the Mennonite church, something to be celebrated amidst the self-centered loneliness that is so pervasive in modern culture.

Finally, Anabaptists-Mennonites stress the way in which the church is to be a “new community” that collectively models God’s intended future for the whole world. The church is not an end in itself, but a divine creation to serve the *missio Dei*, the “mission of God” to renew the world [§108]. The historic stance of nonresistance and nonviolence is to be placed into this context. “It is part of the new way of ordering human relationships under the new covenant. . . . The missionary function of the church is to extend forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing beyond itself. . . . The pursuit of peace is an eschatological anticipation of the kingdom” [§108]. To quote from one of the Mennonite confessions,

peace with God includes a commitment to the way of reconciliation modeled by the Prince of Peace. [...] The people of God join in the struggle for justice, yet are prepared to suffer persecution, knowing that sin, guilt and death will not prevail. [§108]

## Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. When you think of the word “church” what images comes first to your mind? What does it mean to be part of the “church”? Is the church primarily your local congregation or do you think of it more generally as the Christian church?
2. How closely in your experience is baptism associated with church membership? What does it mean to be a “member” of your congregation? Some people have argued that baptism can happen in any setting (i.e., a church camp) or with any group of believers (a revival meeting). Do you agree or disagree? Why?
3. How does “formation” happen in your congregation? Is it focused mostly on formal instruction (e.g., catechism class; Sunday School; sermons), the habits associated with Sunday morning worship, or in less formal ways? Is “mutual accountability” a part of formation in your congregation? If so, how is it expressed?
4. What do you find most interesting about the relationship between baptism and church membership in the Lutheran and Catholic accounts? Is there anything here that Mennonites could apply to their own practices?

## Prayer

In baptism God gives us a new identity as his people.  
In a world that has turned away from its creator,  
Where anonymity and rootlessness threaten our existence,  
God calls a people into covenant embrace.  
God called Abraham and Sarah, gave them new names,  
and promised to make of them a new nation  
through which he would bless all the families of the world.  
God cut a covenant into Israel’s flesh, carving out a people for himself.  
They would light the path home for all humanity.  
In the fullness of time, God sent his only Son, Jesus, to be our Savior.  
In his death on the cross our old self is dead and buried;  
In his resurrection we rise to a new life and look forward to a new creation.  
When we are baptized  
In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
The triune God seals our adoption as his children and writes his name  
invisibly on our foreheads..  
“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood,  
A holy nation, God’s special possession . . .  
Once you were not a people,  
But now you are the people of God” (I Pet. 2:9-10, NIV)  
By baptism we have a new identity in Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *The Worship Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 2013), 264.



## CHAPTER 7

# Baptism and Christian Discipleship<sup>19</sup>

**GOAL:** To describe the various ways in which all three groups understand the strong connection between baptism and discipleship.

### Context

Each of our groups has harbored certain stereotypes of the others. If Catholics and Lutherans, for example, are inclined sometimes to think of Mennonites as a “sect” that is withdrawn from the world, Mennonites have sometimes used the adjective “nominal” to describe Catholics (i.e., “Catholic in name only”), and have been quick to associate Lutherans with “cheap grace” (i.e., “it doesn’t matter how you live since we’re saved by grace alone”). In both instances, Mennonites assume that their distinctive gift to the larger Christian tradition is a commitment to actually put their faith into practice—that is, to follow the teachings of Jesus in daily life. For Mennonites, a key component of voluntary baptism was its explicit association with a life of daily discipleship in the context of a disciplined community.

Thus, it came as something of a surprise for Mennonites to learn that Catholics and Lutherans also associate baptism with Christian discipleship. Indeed, a significant part of the Trilateral Report focused on the affirmation by all three groups that baptism was only one step in the “life-long process of being a Christian.”

Despite their deep differences, Lutherans, Catholics and Mennonites all agree that baptism is the first step in a life-long process of discipleship. This emphasis on the

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<sup>19</sup> Portions of this chapter draw heavily on Thomas Yoder Neufeld’s “Study Guide for Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.”—<https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/images/d/d3/YoderBaptismStudyGuide2021.pdf>.

connection of discipleship to baptism provides the three communions with an opportunity to place the historic controversy between Anabaptists and Catholics and Lutherans in a “new framework” [§62].

## **Biblical teaching regarding the link between baptism and discipleship**

At the very outset of the Report the participants emphasized that they regard “the revealed Word of God as normative for the life and teaching of the Church” [§6]. Later, the document lists key passages that provide a biblical basis for the link between baptism and the transformation of Christian life [§85-88].<sup>20</sup>

### *a. Explicit link:*

- |                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| i. Romans 6:3-4         | buried and raised with Christ to “newness of life” |
| ii. Romans 6:11         | dead to sin and “alive to God in Christ Jesus”     |
| iii. Colossians 2:12-13 | buried and raised with Christ                      |
| iv. Galatians 3:27      | put on Christ                                      |
| v. 1 Peter 3:20-21      | baptism as an appeal for a clear conscience        |

### *b. Non-explicit link:*

- |                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| i. 1 Peter 1:3, 23        | “born anew”  |
| ii. 2 Cor. 5:17-18        | “new creation”   |
| iii. Romans 8:14-17       | suffer with Christ so as to be glorified with him (Gal 3:26) |
| iv. Ephesians 5:1, 2      | imitate God and walk in love like Christ                     |
| v. Ephesians 5:8-10       | walk as children of light so as to please God                |
| vi. Philippians 1:27      | live in a way that is worthy of the gospel                   |
| vii. Philippians 2:5      | have the mind of Christ                                      |
| viii. Philippians 1:21    | to live is Christ  |
| ix. Matthew 28:18-20      | make disciples and baptize them                              |
| x. 1 Peter 2:21           | the self-giving Christ is the example to follow              |
| xi. 1 Corinthians 12:3    | Jesus is Lord!   |
| xii. Ephesians 4:12-13    | grow into maturity and unity                                 |
| xiii. Luke 17:5           | Increase our faith!  |
| xiv. John 15:4-5          | abiding in the vine and bearing fruit                        |
| xv. Romans 7:14-15, 22-25 | the struggle with sin continues                              |
| xvi. Galatians 5:17       | Spirit and flesh at war in the lives of baptized believers   |

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<sup>20</sup> The following Scripture passages, cited in the *Report*, are summarized in this form in Thomas Yoder Neufeld’s “Study Guide for Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.”—<https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/images/d/d3/YoderBaptismStudyGuide2021.pdf>.

All three communions agree that

every baptized person needs to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ as the way of living out his or her baptism. But this only takes place together with the other members of the Christian community and, moreover, impels disciples to witness their faith to the wider world outside the visible borders of the church [§89].

## **Baptism and Christian Discipleship: Personal, Ecclesial, and Public Dimensions**

1. All agree that a personal aspect of discipleship is joyful gratitude for saving grace and communion with God received in baptism (Phil 4:4). They agree on the regenerating power of the Spirit in a person's "life-long process of repentance, conversion, and transformation" [§90].
2. Baptism also clearly has an *ecclesial* dimension:

For *Lutherans* the "promise of God's grace alone" (*sola gratia*) shapes their understanding what it means to live out baptism in discipleship. It means, first, life-long listening for God's gracious word in sermon, study, and catechesis, and receiving grace repeatedly in the Lord's Supper. Grace cannot be earned; but it is the "source of good works by which the believer responds to the love of God and serves God and the neighbor without the self-centered intention of earning grace and righteousness" [§94]. Notably, the Ten Commandments figure prominently in Lutheran catechisms, obedience to which is the "fruit of faith." This exceedingly high standard of behavior serves to confront the believer with the need to return again and again to the grace first offered in baptism. Like Catholics and Mennonites, Lutherans speak explicitly about the priesthood of all who have been baptized, which means that the baptized engage in bringing the gospel to others, and in bringing the concerns of others to God in prayer. As with Catholics and Mennonites, living out one's baptism may involve the sacrifice of time, resources, and even one's life.

*Anabaptist-Mennonites* understand living out baptism in discipleship as "learning from and walking in the way of Christ," or "following Jesus" [§93]. They often draw attention to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7 and Luke 6). In 1527, one of the earliest Anabaptist confessions described the connection between baptism and discipleship in terms of "walking in the resurrection of Jesus Christ" with the "wish to be buried with Him in death." Living out baptism means surrender to Christ, to his way and his teaching, to the point of giving one's life, the "baptism of blood." "The goal of post-baptismal discipleship, rooted in ethical and doctrinal teaching, is for believers to take the call of Christ so seriously that they would be willing to face torture and death" [§93].

3. Finally, baptism has a *public* dimension. All three communions recognize the connection between baptism and Jesus' proclamation of the "kingdom" or "reign of God" (Luke 4). The public dimension of discipleship means

participating in the mission of reconciliation, justice, and peace inaugurated by Jesus, inviting our contemporaries to come to know Jesus Christ and experience the joy of faith in him and in his message. It means witnessing, by word and action, to the truth and goodness of the Gospel in the public square. [§102]

There is increasing awareness in all three communions that this includes care of creation.

Such agreement notwithstanding, there are distinct emphases each communion brings which have at times been major sources of controversy and division.

- A. *Lutherans* view the Christian life as lived out in "three estates of society: family, government, and church" [§104]. Luther famously defined the relationship between church and state in his doctrine of the "two kingdoms" or "two realms." He was motivated by the desire to free the church to fulfill its specific calling to serve the world, namely, through preaching the gospel. The state, also an "instrument of God's love and providential will, . . . is responsible for safeguarding order, peace and justice in society. The two realms are not opposed, but complement each other" [§105]. These have been balanced in various ways since the Reformation. Lutherans recognize that a rigid application of this doctrine has led to "unconditional adoption" of political conditions and demands of the state, with sometimes terrible consequences, especially in the twentieth century. They point out, however, that even the *Augsburg Confession* places the call to obedience to magistrates and laws alongside Acts 5:29 (obeying God rather than human authorities when they are in conflict) in order to identify the limits of such obedience [§106]. Lutherans point out that the Lutheran World Federation was established in 1947 in the aftermath of World War II precisely to set a new tone as a global communion. The Federation sought to address the call to discipleship in the public sphere and to join the proclamation of the gospel with advocacy for justice and peace [§104].
- B. Drawing on recent Vatican documents as well as a rich body of social teachings going back to the nineteenth century, *Catholics* stress the importance of the relationship between baptism and public engagement. Discipleship means solidarity with the suffering of all humanity. "Basing these principles on the dignity of each person, [Catholics] emphasize the importance of fostering the common good. . . ." [§107]. They point to Pope Francis' attempts to shift from being a powerful institution to become a "church of the poor." He speaks of the church as a "field hospital," caring for the poor and wounded [§107]. This teaching has found expression in countless individual acts, but also in groups and movements, schools, and hospitals, both local and global.

C. A recent Mennonite confession of faith states: “We believe that the church . . . is the new community of disciples sent into the world to proclaim the reign of God and to provide a foretaste of the church’s glorious hope.”<sup>21</sup> God’s intention for humanity extends beyond the boundaries of the church; the church is brought in order to serve all humankind. “The missionary function of the church is to extend forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing beyond itself. In this way it participates in the *missio Dei* for the renewal of the world. At the heart of the divine mission is peacemaking. The pursuit of peace is an eschatological anticipation of the kingdom. Believers are baptized into this mission and sustained by God’s promise” [§108]. For Mennonites, one public expression of witness has been a commitment to peacemaking and reconciliation that has sometimes been expressed as “nonresistance.”

Nonresistance is not simply a matter of refusing to bear arms in wartime, although that is certainly included. Rather it is a totally new life orientation in which all human relationships are governed by patience, understanding, love, forgiveness, and a desire for the redemption even of the enemy. It is part of the new way of ordering human relationships under the new covenant.<sup>22</sup>

In summary: Lutherans tend to stress the doctrine of “two kingdoms” or “two realms” of church and civil authority as both blessing and historic challenge not to let the church slip into subservience to the state. Catholics stress the growing tradition of social teaching, pushing the Church toward the poor and the marginalized. Mennonites stress the call to reconciliation and peacemaking.

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<sup>21</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Article 9: The Church of Jesus Christ).

<sup>22</sup> Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1984), 264.

## Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. What do you see as the distinctive strengths in other traditions for how they seek to live out their baptism in the public sphere? Have you had experience with persons or movements from either of these traditions that has inspired you?
2. In the document the Lutherans readily confess that they have fallen short in their presence and witness in the public sphere. Are there confessions that Mennonites should make in this area as well? In what ways do you think Mennonites could improve the public expression of their witness to the world?
3. Mennonites have often had a somewhat ambivalent relationship to the state—grateful for its ordering function in society, but suspicious about its reliance on coercive force (policing/military) to preserve that order. What is your understanding of how Christians should relate to the state?
4. Mennonites are often known in ecumenical contexts for their emphasis on service, reconciliation, and peacemaking. Is this how other churches in your community regard Mennonites? How are these traits made visible in your congregation?
5. If baptism does indeed have a personal, ecclesial, and public component, which of these is emphasized the most in your congregation? Which needs more attention? Why?

## Prayer

Obeying the word of our Lord Jesus,  
and confident of his promises,  
we baptize those whom God has called.  
In baptism, God claims us  
and seals us to show that we belong to God.  
God frees us from sin and death,  
uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.  
By water and the Holy Spirit,  
we are made members of the church, the body of Christ,  
and joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice.  
Let us remember with joy our own baptism.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *The Worship Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 2013), 268.

## CHAPTER 8

# Enduring Questions . . . and Challenges Accepted

**GOAL:** To explore how the insights expressed of the dialogue might change the way we think about baptism in our context, and what it might mean to actually accept the challenges named in the statement in our own congregations.

The points of common ground expressed in “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church” might surprise readers, especially those in Anabaptist-Mennonite groups who have grown accustomed to describing the virtues of their own tradition by contrast it with the beliefs and practices of the other two.

Thus, for example, all three communions see repentance, faith, and committed discipleship—core concerns of Mennonites—as “necessarily” related to Christian life within the Church, in which baptism plays an essential role:

. . . all three of our communions wholeheartedly agree that baptism is intended not as an isolated, self-enclosed event, but as an important moment that is *to be lived out throughout the course of one’s life. It is intended by God to enable and to unfold into a life of discipleship.* [§84]

. . . Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites can fully agree that the lifelong living out of the gift of faith which is celebrated in baptism *has not only personal but also ecclesial and public dimensions.* [§89]

. . . [all agreed that] discipleship entails a spirituality that . . . involves a *lifelong process of repentance, conversion, and transformation.* [§90]



It might also surprise Mennonites to learn that some Catholic theologians have come to see the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (i.e., adult baptism) as the “normative” expression of initiation into the Church, the fullest expression of the meaning of baptism [§79]. It was only in 1969 that the Vatican first published a rite for the baptism of infants. Until then, while baptism of infants was the usual practice, infants were essentially addressed as adults. Catholics make the point that “it is the rite for adults that is the model of the baptismal process” [§79, n97]. “The baptized, under the irreplaceable assistance of the grace of the Holy Spirit, are meant freely to convert from sin, have faith in Jesus Christ and embrace full, conscious and faithful participation in the life of the Christian community” [§79]. Mennonites could not say it better.

All three groups share the conviction that the Spirit is active in both baptized individuals and in the communities supporting them. At the same time, they acknowledge that for a significant number of persons this is not reflected in the way they live [§81]. All three communions also admit to “ineffective” formation, regardless of whether they baptize infants or upon confession of faith [§82].

In summary, the three delegations agreed on the following [§56-57, 62]:<sup>24</sup>

- A. All humans are sinners in need of redemption [§62].
- B. God’s initiative is primary in baptism.
- C. The community is centrally involved in both baptism and formation.
- D. Baptism is part of a life-long process of discipleship, which culminates in “the fullness of eternal life promised and accomplished by Jesus’ victory over sin and death” [§57].
- E. Each of us struggles with a gap between our teachings on baptism and its actual practice in congregational settings.

## Challenges Accepted

One of the most significant outcomes of the dialogue was an open acknowledgment of several persistent tensions—or even inconsistencies—in our respective traditions, especially in the ways that baptism is actually understood or practiced in local settings. Indeed, “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church” is remarkably honest in acknowledging the shortcomings of each tradition and in the openness it expresses to accept the challenges of ongoing exploration and discernment.

Here are the challenges that each group accepted, excerpted directly from the document. As you read through these, note one or two challenges from each group that you find especially significant:

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<sup>24</sup> Portions of this chapter draw heavily on Thomas Yoder Neufeld’s “Study Guide for Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church.”—<https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/images/d/d3/YoderBaptismStudyGuide2021.pdf>.

## **CATHOLICS:**

- a. In light of the fact that the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification proved to be a valuable resource during our conversations about baptism, indicating that it can be useful in dialogue about more topics than just that of justification by faith, the Catholic church ought to continue to explore ways of inviting even more churches to associate with that agreement (§154).
- b. We need to devise strategies and pastoral programs that will help Catholics to more deeply appreciate the value of baptism, recognizing that there is a problem in the current lack of such appreciation (§155).
- c. It would be good to devise a common ritual for the welcoming into our Church believers who have been baptized in other communities (§156).
- d. There is a clear gap between our theology of baptism which relates it inseparably to discipleship of Christ and involvement in the life of the community, on the one hand, and the fact that such commitment on the part of many baptized Catholics is lukewarm or lacking, on the other. Pastoral strategies and faith formation are called for to address this gap between our professed baptismal theology and our pastoral experience, especially to ensure that parents who request the baptism of their children understand the responsibility they are assuming to provide the means for the child to arrive at a personal and committed faith (§157).
- e. We need to stress more effectively the link between baptism and mission (§158).

## **LUTHERANS:**

- a. Lutherans are challenged to develop a theology of the child, especially addressing the soteriological status of unbaptized children and to reflect on how to relate to article IX of the Latin version of the Augsburg Confession and its condemnation of those who assert “that children are saved without baptism” (§140).
- b. Lutherans emphasize that promise and faith, the act of baptism and faith in it belong together in order to achieve salvation; nevertheless, they experience quite often that baptized people do not take their baptism seriously. Looking at our own churches with the eyes of Mennonites makes this even more painful. Therefore the conclusion should be drawn that, whoever baptizes infants has the obligation to do mission, catechesis and make all attempts so that the baptized appreciate their baptism and rejoice in it in faith (§141).
- c. That baptism as the basis and point of reference for the whole Christian life is often forgotten in the everyday journey of the believer. Thus all possible attempts should be made to make people aware of baptism as a gift and challenge for everybody’s Christian life, for example through services for the commemoration of baptism (§142).

- d. Baptism is the introduction into the Body of Christ that transcends the borders of nations and confessions of faith. Looking at our baptism with the eyes of Catholics, Lutherans might become aware that the dimension of the universal church is often absent from their minds. In order to strengthen the awareness of this dimension that belongs to each baptism, one could think of special baptismal services in which representatives of other churches participate and give a testimony for the baptized. In so doing, they witness to the presence of the universal church (§143).

### **MENNONITES:**

- a. We welcome the challenge this dialogue has brought us to more clearly see a commitment to the unity of the body of Christ as integral to our sense of church and mission. Working for church unity enlarges our faithfulness to the gospel rather than, as is sometimes feared, reducing it. We recognize the pain that those traditions express when we baptize someone who has been baptized as an infant in their churches, which suggests to them that we consider their baptism invalid. (§124).
- b. We have much to learn concerning the faithful practice of “reconciled diversity.” By the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit this practice holds together divergent realities in unity. One of these realities is the fostering of deep convictions arising from obedience to the gospel. The other is a willingness to learn from and cooperate with those of different convictions that also arise from obedience to the gospel (§125).
- c. We have been challenged to acknowledge that the beginning of infant baptism is not co-terminus with the rise of the state church. Infant baptism was practiced in some settings before Constantine. Baptism on confession of faith remained the dominant form of baptism after a Christian social order had been established. In some settings infant and believers’ baptism were practiced side by side without being church dividing (§126).
- d. We have been challenged in our understanding of conversion and baptism to better hold together an awareness of our continuing tendency to go against God and the possibility of leading a life following Jesus Christ faithfully (§127).
- e. We have been challenged not to allow our concern for the human response in conversion and baptism to overshadow the divine initiative in every aspect of salvation, including baptism (§128).
- f. We have been challenged to develop greater consistency and depth in preparing people for baptism and in making the remembrance of our baptism a lifelong motif of discipleship (§129).
- g. We have been challenged to formulate a fuller theology of the child, particularly with regard to the age of accountability and the salvific status of older children who have reached the age of accountability. Clarity at these points would enrich the dedication of parents and newborn children as well as their subsequent nurture. (§130).

## Going Forward

The three conversation partners now ask themselves (and us!) important questions. Can we recognize each other's divergent ways of understanding as "authentic?" Specifically, the questions posed to each of our churches include the following:

- a. Have Mennonites sufficiently recognized the New Testament teaching regarding the relationship between baptism and salvation, the very reason why Catholics and Lutherans believe the Church should baptize infants [§80]. If baptism is "only" a symbol, how do Mennonites understand or explain salvation?
- b. Might not Lutherans and Catholics acknowledge the decision of parents to foster a mature faith in their children prior to the request for baptism that has determined Mennonite practice [a reference to child dedication] as an authentic approach to Christian initiation? [§78]
- c. Might not Mennonites acknowledge that, given an assurance of familial and congregational commitment to provide formation in faith and discipleship, the choice of parents to request baptism for their young children, as practiced by Lutherans and Catholics, is an authentic approach to Christian initiation? [§78]
- d. Can we [Mennonites, Lutherans, and Catholics] acknowledge that our different concerns do not contradict each other, and are grounded in basic aspects of the Gospel? [§78]

Readers should note that these are questions rather than assertions. The term "acknowledge" suggests not agreement so much as recognition that those with whom we disagree are also seeking to be faithful to the Bible and to the Gospel.

## A Final Question for Mennonites

Looming throughout the dialogue was a question for Mennonites that goes to the very heart of our 500-year-old division. If Mennonites reject the baptisms of infants as legitimate—if, for example, we insist that new members coming into the Mennonite church be (re)baptized—do we regard our Lutherans and Catholics neighbors as Christians? In responding to this question, Mennonite representatives recognized the widely-differing cultural contexts in which this question has emerged; they also acknowledged that they do not have the authority to speak definitively on behalf of all Mennonite groups around the world. Instead, they extended an invitation to all Anabaptist-Mennonite groups to engage in the practice of Christian discernment.

Here is how they posed the question:

"On the basis of this shared faith and in respect for the intention of those who baptize infants—setting them on the path toward life in Christ—we propose that Anabaptist-Mennonite churches consider:

- a. receiving members from infant baptism churches on the basis of their confession of faith and commitment to discipleship without repeating the water rite. If the candidate requests rebaptism a process of discernment prior to her/

his reception should include conversation between the candidate, the church of origin, and the receiving church in respect for one another and unity in the body of Christ;

- b. honoring the nurturing that candidates received toward Christ in their church of origin (where that is the case);
- c. asking all members, including those now being received, 1) to affirm our theological-ecclesiological interpretation and practice of baptism and 2) to respect those churches which practice baptism into a life of faith and discipleship differently as brothers and sisters in the one body of Christ;
- d. enriching (or developing) practices of thanksgiving and blessing of newborn children and their parents as well as committing local congregations to nurture and care for them;
- e. providing occasions for all members to “remember their baptism” and renew their baptismal commitments in both congregational and interchurch settings.
- f. calling for collective and individual soul searching as to why it has been so difficult for us to hold together the quest for purity and the quest for unity, among ourselves and with other churches (§133).

Perhaps more than any other theme coming out of the dialogue, this question is the most pressing one for the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church to engage.

As you do, please communicate your insights, convictions, questions, and concerns to the Faith and Life Commission of the Mennonite World Conference.

## Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. In this chapter we see the conversation partners looking for a way to walk together in the unity of the Spirit when they are unable to come to agreement. They “acknowledge” a shared desire to be faithful to Scripture and Gospel, even if they can’t agree. Rather than simply stating positions, they ask respectful questions. What are the risks and benefits of such an approach?
2. The conversation partners conclude this chapter with hope that the diverse ways of living out baptism, rooted in a shared faith in Christ, and aided by the Spirit, might lead to an “exchange of gifts.” What, if any, gifts do you see in the Catholic or Lutheran tradition as a result of this dialogue?
3. Is there openness to consider that some differences might be a God-given diversity, intended to enrich the body of Christ? [§112] Is disagreement on baptism an unsurmountable barrier to fellowship/communion?
4. Mennonite World Conference is a global family. Some Mennonites come from generations raised in churches with long established traditions. Others have been drawn into the community only recently. Does the Anabaptist/Mennonite perspective presented in the Report reflect your own background and experience of how baptism is taught and practiced, or of how you understand your own baptism?
5. The huge question that remains for Mennonite congregations is the one posed at the end of the Study Guide: could your congregation consider “receiving members from infant baptism churches on the basis of their confession of faith and commitment to discipleship rather than repeating the water rite?” How do you respond? What might be gained or lost by such a commitment?

## Prayer

Remember your baptism and be thankful.  
You are a disciple of Jesus Christ.  
Live in love, as Christ loved us  
and gave himself for us.  
Rejoice always; prayer without ceasing;  
give thanks in all circumstances;  
For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.  
The peace of God, which passes all understanding,  
keep your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. Amen.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *The Worship Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 2013), 293.









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GOSHEN COLLEGE